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UNCLAS LILONGWE 000731

SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: FOOD SECURITY TURNS POLITICAL

1. (SBU) Summary: The looming food crisis has become a political hot topic recently, with both the President and his opponents accusing each other of deserting the poor. The latest flare up is over the opposition's failure to support a new humanitarian fund promoted by the President. This is sure to be only the first salvo in the political battle over hunger, as the food crisis promises only to grow over the next few months. End Summary.

2. (U) President Mutharika kicked off his Feed the Nation Fund (FNF) Sunday August 21 at the New State House, where many prominent politicians and businesspeople made donations to the Fund. The President says the FNF will act independently from government as a western-style non-profit organization, aimed at helping Malawians facing a food shortage. The board of directors of the Fund is composed of many prominent, but primarily apolitical, members of the business community. Of particular note is the number of influential businesspeople from Malawi's South Asian community, with whom the government has had little interaction to date.

3. (U) The President says he has put forward the idea of the FNF as an example of how Malawi should increase its self-reliance. He says Malawi should do everything it can to address its food-security problems internally, and only then go to the donors for assistance. However, the President and his government have had problems articulating the concept and goals of the FNF in a country lacking a strong history of local voluntary humanitarian organizations.

3. (U) The President has insisted that the Fund will be apolitical. However, he has also chastised the opposition for not supporting the FNF, accusing them of failing to help the poor. For its turn, the opposition has questioned whether the FNF will act as a political tool of the President's party.

4. (SBU) The issue of food security is the most pressing problem currently in Malawi. As such, it is sure to be exploited by all political parties as the current crisis deepens. However, it does seem that the President's new FNF might indeed perform apolitically. While there have not been discussions of how the Fund will actually administer the donations it receives, the composition of its board of directors is encouraging. That said, the fund itself and food security in general are issues that are of growing political importance as the food crisis deepens.

EASTHAM